

I've been attentive to what I don't want my cats to do, I haven't provided meaningful alternative outlets to allow them to express what they *do* enjoy doing. "We have to take the responsibility to enrich their lives, or they're going to take it upon themselves," she says.

For exasperated pet owners like me, she recommends trying regular sessions of interactive play. It can be as simple as fluttering a felt strip attached to a wand and string. That game will trigger the cat's predatory instincts. After five or 10 minutes, she says, it's helpful to reward the cat with a high-protein treat to give the satisfaction of a successful hunt.

Mlinek suggests two or three such sessions a day so the cat will come to expect them. Supplement those games with toys that inspire individual play. Or you can keep it cheap by hiding some food in an empty egg carton or leaving out a cardboard box.

Keep in mind that if an uncharacteristic behavior, such as urinating outside the litter box, springs up suddenly, illness may be the cause. "All the behavior modification

in the world isn't going to take care of a cat or a dog who has a medical problem," cautions Susan Krebsbach, a veterinary behaviorist based in Oregon, Wis.

After you've ruled out possible medical triggers, your cat's veterinarian may have advice for solving behavior problems. Or you may want to hire a behaviorist—a trained professional who evaluates an animal's behavior and suggests modification strategies. If this isn't in your budget, many local humane societies run telephone help lines and post tip sheets on their websites. If there's a veterinary school in your area, it may have an animal behavior clinic. Plus, there are countless books that may prove useful.

All families and cats are different. But for difficult pet behavior cases, education is the remedy. "When people educate themselves and know what is normal behavior, it's a little easier to deal with," says Nancy Peterson, HSUS cat programs manager.

And, though it's frustrating to hear, I love how Peterson diagnoses my problem: "You have to think like a dog or cat. Thinking like a human will get you nowhere."

This means understanding that cats like to scratch and climb and dogs like to chew and roughhouse. They have natural instincts for slicing up furniture or munching on shoes and aren't motivated by spite.

What alternatives can you provide? It may be as easy as offering scratching posts sprinkled with catnip or treats embedded in chew toys.

In my case, I ordered toys recommended by other cat owners to redirect my kitties' boundless energy. I also bought a couple of scratchers of different designs. Frankie and Fatty haven't stopped clawing the furniture, but they're definitely doing it less.

I know I have to get better about playtime. I'm so exhausted by the end of the day that I just want to chill. Changing six years of behavior is a struggle—not just for my cats, but for me, too.

► **MICHELE MELENDEZ** is a writer living in Washington, D.C.

More Help for Fractious Felines

- Trim your cat's claws every week.
- Hide treats throughout the house. Cats love to hunt for them.
- Place some food in an empty egg carton to create an inexpensive toy.
- Groom cats regularly, which may help soothe them.
- Praise cats for acceptable behavior. Saying "no" won't change their habits.
- Look for solutions early: Don't let your frustration over your pet's unsavory behavior stew until you reach a breaking point.

► **FOR DETAILED ADVICE** on solving pet behavior problems, visit humanesociety.org/petsforlife.

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